

Tontine Park – Renton 1878-1928

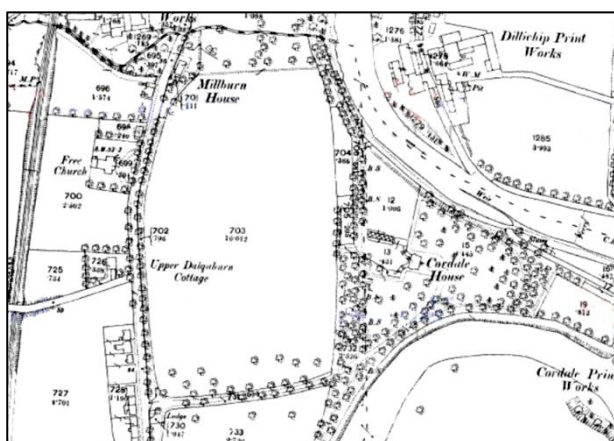
Renton is a village in Dunbartonshire situated on the River Leven with a present population of just over 2,000. It is 3 miles north of Dumbarton and about 20 miles north-west of Glasgow. Yet for a number of years in the late 1880s, this otherwise unremarkable village was home to the best, or one of the best, football teams in the world.

Renton F.C. was formed in 1872 as a result, it is thought, of enthusiasts from the village visiting nearby Alexandria early in the 1872-73 season to watch the recently formed Vale of Leven play the famous Glasgow club Queens Park. Renton joined the Scottish F.A. soon after that body was formed in 1873 and were one of 16 clubs that entered the inaugural Scottish Cup in 1873-74. They took part in one of the first three games played in the competition, beating Kilmarnock 2-0 in Glasgow on 18th October, and went on to reach the semi-finals before going out 2-0 to Queens Park. In 1874-75, they went all the way to the final only to lose once again to Queens Park, 3-0.

After that encouraging start though, Renton slowly faded into the background, caught in the shadow of their two more successful Dunbartonshire neighbours – Vale of Leven, just a mile to the north in Alexandria and Dumbarton, three miles to the south. Vale of Leven won the Scottish Cup three times in succession between 1876 and 1879 while after being beaten finalists in both 1881 and 1882, Dumbarton won the 1883 final by beating Vale of Leven 2-1 in a replay.

In those earliest days, Renton played in a private park to the north of the village. It is not certain exactly where this was but the most likely site appears to be the land to the west of Cordale House, today mostly covered by housing between New Cordale Road and Cordale Avenue.

Below: The area the north of Renton in 1862. The open field to the west of Cordale House seems to be the most likely location of Renton's first ground.



The first public park in Renton had been opened on 31st May 1873 and covered 13 acres of land to the south of the village. Half of the rent for the land was guaranteed by three local benefactors while the other half was paid for by the villagers who clubbed together so that they would be able to enjoy the benefits of their new recreation area. In 1877, Renton F.C. began playing their home games in this new park which soon became known as Tontine Park.

A tontine is a financial instrument whereby subscribers pay an amount of money into a fund and then each receives a lifetime benefit from the fund. In this case, the benefit from the rent fund was the use of the land for recreation and so the arrangement could be described as a tontine, hence the ground's name. In recent years, teams from the village have played on pitches that are close to the original Tontine Park but on the opposite side of the road to Dumbarton. Although this area is officially known as Wylie Park, it too has become known locally as Tontine Park.

The second half of the 1870s and the early 1880s were not though a good period for Renton. They did continue to enter the Scottish Cup and on 19th October 1878, in one of their first games at their new home, they attracted an estimated crowd of 4,000 for a Cup derby with Dumbarton. Renton though were well beaten, 6-0, and the club was gradually fading away. Although they did as usual enter the Scottish Cup in 1881-82, they were struggling to raise a team and withdrew without playing a game, resigning their membership of the Scottish F.A. at the same time.

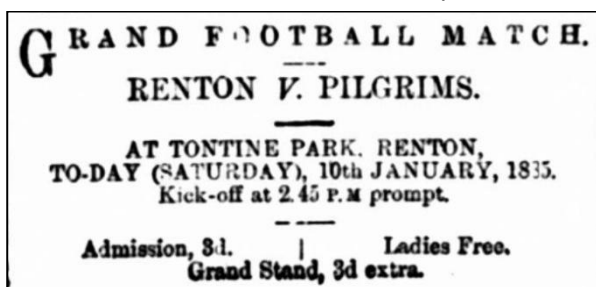
The club's revival began in 1882-83. They rejoined the Scottish F.A. and won three games in the Scottish Cup, including a 14-1 win away to Southfield (of Slamannan, Stirlingshire) and also beat Falkirk in a replay, before going out 5-3 in the Fourth Round at home to the Ayrshire side Lugar Boswell in front of a 2,000 crowd.

This revival of a village team in the Vale of Leven attracted little attention outside the immediate area but that all changed on 8th September 1883.

Renton had as usual entered the Scottish Cup and in the First Round, were drawn at home to the cup holders, Dumbarton. Renton were by then so disregarded that it was assumed that they would offer little more than token resistance to their illustrious neighbours yet the village team sent shockwaves through Scottish football by winning the game 2-1 in front of a "large concourse of spectators".

The players were carried off the field on the shoulders of their enthusiastic supporters and thus commenced a season when suddenly, all the leading Scottish clubs wanted to arrange fixtures with them. Renton beat King's Park 6-1 in the Second Round of the Cup before going out 4-1 away to eventual finalists Vale of Leven in the Third Round but they acquitted themselves well throughout the season which ended with a 2-0 win away to Vale of Leven in front of a 1,000 crowd. In January, Renton had played Vale of Leven at home and although they lost 2-1, they were able to attract a crowd of 2,000.

Tontine Park was first enclosed in 1883 but initially there were no facilities actually on the ground, even for players, as the dressing rooms were about 100 yards away. However during the 1884-85 season, a small grandstand was erected which seems from later maps to have been positioned on the east side of the ground, straddling the half-way line. The exact date when this first appeared is not clear but it was certainly in use by January 1885 as the advertisement below from the Lennox Herald clearly shows.



Renton began the 1884-85 season in fine form and were unbeaten until 1st November when they lost 4-0 at Dumbarton in the Dumbartonshire Cup. In the Scottish Cup though, they were carrying all before them. They beat Vale of Leven Wanderers 2-1 at Tontine Park, East Stirlingshire 10-2 away, Northern 9-2 and St. Mirren 2-1, both at Tontine Park and then on 27th December, they beat Rangers 5-3 at Tontine Park in the quarter-finals in front of an estimated crowd of 4,000.

Renton's semi-final opponents were Hibernian who had home advantage with the game being played at Easter Road in front of an 8,000 crowd. Hibs twice took the lead and were twice pegged back before half-time but just a few minutes from the end, Renton snatched the winner.

The final was a very local affair between Renton and Vale of Leven, played at Hampden Park in a gale force wind that ruined the game as a spectacle for the 5,000 crowd. Almost inevitably, given the conditions, the game ended goalless and so the sides had to return a week later for the replay. The attendance had risen to 7,000 but the wind had dropped to just a stiff breeze. Even so, it was still goalless until mid-way through the second half when M'Call scored for Renton. Two

quick goals from M'Intyre soon followed and although the Vale got a late consolation, it was Renton who lifted the Scottish Cup with a 3-1 win.

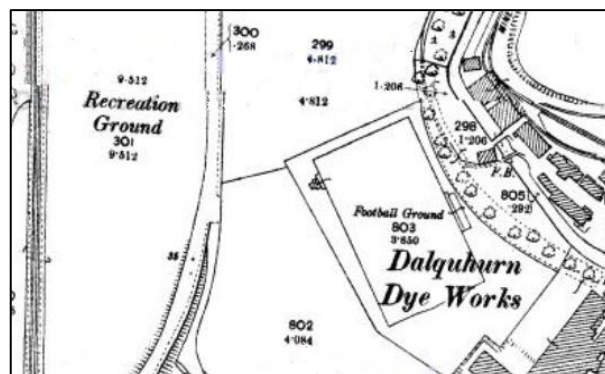
Nor were the village team a one-season wonder. In 1885-86, they mounted a strong defence of their trophy, winning 15-0 away to Kirkintilloch, then 7-2 away to Dumbarton Athletic (not the same team as Dumbarton) before a more modest 1-0 win away to another Dumbarton club, Albion. Cowlares were beaten 4-0 at Tontine Park but Vale of Leven took Renton to a replay with a 2-2 draw at Tontine Park before being beaten 3-0 on their own ground in Alexandria.

For the second year in succession, Renton were drawn to play Hibernian in the semi-finals at Easter Road and for the second year in succession, they proved superior to the Edinburgh club, winning 2-0 and qualifying to meet Queens Park in the final at Third Lanark's Cathkin Park ground.

A crowd variously estimated at between 7,000 and 10,000 saw Queens take an early lead which they held until Renton equalised early in the second half. However Renton seemed to tire towards the end and Queens scored twice more to win the cup 3-1.

Although disappointed at not being able to retain the Scottish Cup, there was considerable consolation for Renton in May when they won Scotland's second most prestigious trophy, the Glasgow Charity Cup. This was competed for by five invited clubs with Renton beating Queens Park 5-2 in their semi-final and then Vale of Leven 3-1 in the final. Both games were played at Hampden Park with crowds of between 3,000 and 4,000. The trophy was afterwards put on display in the window of James Cameron, drapers, in Main Street, Renton.

Below: Tontine Park in 1898, sandwiched between the road to Dumbarton and the Dalquhurn Dye Works. Note the small building in the north-west corner of the ground, thought to be the 1886 pavilion and the larger building on the east side, thought to be the original grandstand. The Recreation Ground on the opposite side of the road is now where teams from the village play and is known officially as Wylie Park but by locals as Tontine Park.



A new pavilion was erected at Tontine Park for the start of the 1886-87 season, positioned in the north-west corner of the ground, near the entrance gate. It was described in the *Lennox Herald* as "neat and commodious" and "roomy inside", being made of wood with a slate roof and a brick foundation. It included a lavatory and other conveniences while a new flagstaff was also erected to alert villagers when there was a big event on.

Below: Paragraph from the Lennox Herald dated 25th September 1886 describing the new pavilion at Tontine Park.

FOOTBALL ENTERPRISE.—We notice that the Football Club has just erected a neat and commodious pavilion at their ground, Tontine Park. The erection, which is on a brick foundation, is of wood, having a slated roof, and is placed near the entrance gate. It is roomy inside, and is supplied with lavatory and other conveniences. A new flagstaff has also been erected to warn the villagers when there is a "big event on" in that quarter.

By 1886, Renton were playing in an all-blue strip with a red stripe whereas in 1876, they were playing in all-red with a white stripe. It is not known when the change was made but the 1882 re-forming of the club seems the most likely date.

Renton's participation in the 1886-87 Scottish Cup was much briefer than usual, as they went out in the Third Round, 3-1 away to Third Lanark but the campaign was enlivened by their first and only venture into the English F.A. Cup. As the first and only team from football-mad Dunbartonshire to take part in the competition, there was huge interest in their entry and even more so when they were drawn at home to Accrington in the First Round.

The Lancashire side were quoted as being one of the teams with a good chance of winning the cup and had already beaten Dumbarton 3-1 at Boghead Park in a friendly in September. It was considered moving the game to Hampden Park where a much larger crowd could be expected but no free Saturday could be found and so the game went ahead at Tontine Park. The pitch was enlarged to meet F.A. Cup standards and the price of admission was doubled from 3d. to 6d. (2.5p) with a further 6d. for entry to the grandstand.

Below: Advertisement from the Lennox Herald for the F.A. Cup tie against Accrington at Tontine Park.

GRAND FOOTBALL MATCH.
(ENGLISH CUP-TIE.)
RENTON Versus ACCRINGTON
At TONTINE PARK, RENTON,
TO-DAY (SATURDAY), 30TH OCTOBER.
KICK-OFF AT 3 P.M.
ADMISSION, 6d ; Grand Stand 6d extra.

An estimated crowd of 3,000 gathered at Tontine Park where things looked difficult for Renton when they lost their captain M'Intyre to injury early in the game and they had to play on with just 10 men. Even so, they continued to match the English side all over the field and in the second half, Accrington began to tire. With just 15 minutes left, it was Campbell who scored the only goal of the game for Renton.

At the same time as Renton were beating Accrington, a crowd of almost 20,000 were at Hampden where Preston North End beat Queens Park 3-0 in another F.A. Cup tie. Many of that crowd were unhappy with the result and the way it was obtained, deeming Preston over-physical. Their unhappiness became so threatening that the Queens Park players had to protect those of Preston as they left the field. This unpleasant ending to the game was to have a knock-on effect on Renton in a later round.

Renton's next opponents though were holders Blackburn Rovers who had won the trophy for the last three years in succession, having beaten Queens Park in each of the last two finals. However, Rovers had not started the season well and Renton had great hopes of further progress. The interest in the game was immense and having already been knocked out of the competition, Queens Park offered Renton the use of Hampden Park for their on 20th November tie, an offer that was very gratefully accepted.

Around 9,000 people watched the game and saw Rovers take the lead after 20 minutes when Renton's normally reliable 'keeper Lindsay had plenty of time to kick clear but instead tried to pick the ball up and fumbled it, allowing Walton to put Rovers ahead. Barbour equalised for Renton just two minutes into the second half but another misjudgement by Lindsay resulted in Rovers retaking the lead only 3 minutes later. Again he fumbled the ball, allowing the Blackburn forwards to bundle it over the line. Renton made strenuous efforts to equalise but it seemed it would be in vain until 3 minutes from time when Barbour made it 2-2. An extra 20 minutes was played but neither side scored and so a replay was necessary two weeks later at Blackburn's Leamington ground.

Those amongst the 6,000 crowd who thought Renton's best chance had been lost at Hampden were quickly disabused of the idea when Renton had by the far the better of the opening half and had two "goals" disallowed in the first 15 minutes. They eventually took the lead about 20 minutes into the second half but then had to withstand tremendous Rovers pressure before Barbour made the game safe with their second goal seven minutes from the end, giving Renton a 2-0 victory.

Sterner opponents than Accrington and F.A. Cup holders Blackburn Rovers were few and far between but there was at least one and now Renton were drawn at home to the famous Preston North End, widely regarded as the best team anywhere in the world at the time. They had beaten the English Cup holders Blackburn Rovers three times already since the start of the season and also the Scottish Cup holders Queens Park 3-0 on their own ground at Hampden. This tie was originally scheduled to be played on 4th December but for various reasons, including the need for Renton's replay with Blackburn, it had to be put back six weeks to 15th January.

Once the date for the game had been agreed, a decision had to be made as to where to play it. It was thought that a crowd similar to the near 20,000 who watched Preston beat Queens Park would want to watch if it was played at Hampden Park but that idea raised a number of problems.

First was that the Renton committee had paid the railway fares of many of their own supporters who went to the Blackburn game at Hampden but that had been very expensive and to do the same again for even more supporters would be even more expensive. Second, many important games and famous teams had been seen in Glasgow and as it was a Dunbartonshire side who had earned the right to meet such a famous side as Preston, then many thought the game should be played in the county. Third was the crowd's threatening behaviour at the end of the Queens Park v. Preston game and some even suggested it should be played in Edinburgh to avoid that.

In any case, Preston were reluctant to return to Glasgow after the way they had been treated and when they appealed to the English F.A., that body supported their view, ruling out Glasgow as a venue for the game.

Tontine Park though was still very basic and would have huge difficulty in accommodating such a crowd and so Dumbarton was put forward as a possibility. In the event though, the committee at Renton decided that the game should be played at Tontine Park and as that decision was taken only nine days before the game was to be played, the arrangements had to be made very quickly.

Three temporary trestle grandstands were erected, the largest being on the west side of the pitch at 120 yards (110 metres) long and extra barriers were installed all around the ground while the North British Railway put on extra trains from Glasgow (Queen Street). The price of admission was quadrupled to 1s.0d. (5p) as compared with the price for ordinary games while tickets for the reserved stand were priced at 2s.0d. (10p). Bunting was put up all around the village and a flag with the motto "The Queen and the People" fluttered above the large new grandstand.

Below: Advertisement from the North British Daily Mail of 12th January 1887 showing the increased prices to be charged for the F.A. Cup game against Preston North End.

GRAND FOOTBALL MATCH.
- RENTON V. PRESTON NORTH END,
AT TONTINE PARK, RENTON.
On SATURDAY, 15th JAN. Kick-off at 2.30 P.M.
Admission, 1s; Reserved Stand tickets, 2s each, may be had by applying to Thomas Hyslop, Hon. Sec., Renton.

One thing that could not be arranged though was the weather. A week earlier, the pitch had a thick covering of snow but then a slow thaw set in, giving hope that it would be playable. However there was then a severe frost so that it became very hard with patches of ice and if the game had not already been delayed by so many weeks, it may well have been postponed. However by spreading first salt and then sand all over the pitch it was made just about playable but still very hard.

Twenty minutes before the game was due to start, the referee, umpires and officials of the two clubs conferred in the middle of the pitch and it was decided that it was too dangerous to play a cup-tie and so the teams should play a friendly. However, given the high entry prices charged, it was thought that there would be trouble from the crowd if this became known and so the decision was not announced. There were around 5,000 in the ground at the time of the conference and perhaps as many as 12,000 when the game began. Very quickly though, the story leaked out and about 1,000 spectators invaded the pitch before making for the pay-boxes, demanding their money back. The game had to be stopped and the players had to return to the pavilion before an announcement was made that the game was indeed a cup-tie but was being played under protest. This mollified the crowd and allowed the match to restart.

Almost immediately, Kelly gave Renton the lead following a corner but Ross (jnr.) equalised for Preston after about 15 minutes play. Renton regained the lead through Davie 10 minutes later following another corner and then McCall made it 3-1 not long before half-time, again following a corner. Preston pushed Renton back into their own half after the break but the home side defended well and still looked dangerous going forward. However it was Preston who scored next, through Thomson, 20 minutes from time and despite tremendous work from Lindsay in the Renton goal, Dewhurst eventually equalised with just a couple of minutes left to make the final score 3-3. When the players left the field with no attempt to play extra time, the spectators realised that this had been no cup-tie but fortunately the game had been highly entertaining and so the crowd dispersed with no further trouble.

It was initially thought that the cup-tie proper would be played at Tontine Park the following Saturday, 22nd January, but Preston suggested that would be unwise because of the way the crowd had been deceived. Fortunately, the English F.A. withdrew their objection to using Hampden Park, where both clubs were happy to play and Queens Park agreed that their ground could be used as long as the normal entry price was doubled to 1s.0d. (5p), in order to deter those who had caused trouble on Preston's previous visit.

Despite the price increase, there were around 10,000 or 12,000 in the ground when Preston took the lead through Ross (jnr.) after 8 minutes play. Gordon added a second following a corner after 15 minutes and although Preston had the better of the rest of the game, there was no more scoring and it ended 2-0. The match receipts were later announced as being £432.

That ended Renton's and Tontine Park's brief association with the F.A. Cup because in the summer of 1887, the Scottish F.A. decided that none of its members could also be members of another association, making all Scottish clubs ineligible for the F.A. Cup. It is not entirely clear why this decision was made but it seems most likely that the Scottish F.A. considered that its clubs' involvement in the English Cup was to the detriment of their own competition.

It did not though end Renton's hunt for trophies. Later in the 1886-87 season, they beat Vale of Leven 1-0 in the final at Hampden Park to retain the Glasgow Charity Cup and they also won the Dumbartonshire Cup for the first time by again beating Vale of Leven in the final, 5-0 in a replay at Boghead Park after a 2-2 draw.

In 1887-88, Renton won the Scottish Cup for the second time, scoring 48 goals in their 8 games and conceding just 8. This included a 6-1 thrashing of Cambuslang at Hampden in the final, a record for the final that has never been improved upon. So highly were Renton regarded that when St. Mirren and Hearts drew three times in the Fourth Round and knew the eventual winner would face Renton in the Fifth Round, it was suggested in the Coatbridge Express that rather than have another replay, it would be better if the 22 players involved joined together to play the village team as that way, it might be an even game!

In the semi-finals, Renton met Queens Park at Tontine Park and again temporary trestle stands were erected especially for the game which Renton won 3-1 before going on to embarrass Cambuslang, 6-1 in the final.

Renton also won the Glasgow Charity Cup, for the third time in succession, in 1887-88, thus becoming holders of the two most prestigious trophies in Scotland and there was still a further honour to come. A challenge match was organised at Hampden Park on 19th May between Renton as Scottish Cup winners and West Bromwich Albion as English Cup winners. Renton won 4-1 and were rather theatrically, but nevertheless accurately, acclaimed as champions of the world.

There had been games before between the English and Scottish Cup winners but this was the first time that the game had been advertised as being for the "World's Championship". Around 6,000 people saw the game which was interrupted after about half an hour by a thunderstorm and then played out in pouring rain to a background of rolling thunder and spectacular lightning flashes. Just to remove any doubt about their right to the title of World Champions, Renton beat Preston North End 4-2 at Hampden two weeks later.

In November of that year, 70 yards of fencing surrounding Tontine Park had to be replaced after being destroyed by a storm but the team were not so easily toppled. They won the Glasgow Charity Cup for the fourth time in succession and were Scottish Cup semi-finalists but their successes were now causing them a problem. Football was still all-amateur in Scotland while in England, professionalism had been legal since 1885 and it was not long before scouts acting for the leading English clubs were spotted in the Vale of Leven. A trickle of Renton players were beginning to make their way south and as the trickle became a flood, it became increasingly difficult to find adequate replacements.

Even so, when the idea of a Scottish League was first suggested on 13th March 1890, it was Peter Fairly, the secretary of Renton who invited 13 other clubs to a meeting in Glasgow. The League eventually got under way on 16th August 1890 and Renton won their first game, 4-1 away to Celtic in front of a 10,000 crowd. The first league fixture at Tontine Park was exactly a week later, a 2-2 draw with St. Mirren. On 20th September, Renton lost 2-1 to Vale of Leven in their second League game at Tontine Park but that was their last league game of the season. On 27th September, Renton beat Edinburgh Saints 5-2 in a friendly at Tontine Park and the reverberations of that seemingly inconsequential game sent shock waves through Scottish football.

Edinburgh Saints was a club that had only just been formed. It included several players who had

previously played for St. Bernard's but that club had been suspended by the Scottish F.A. for "concealed professionalism". The S.F.A. were fighting a rearguard action against professionalism in Scottish football with most of the leading clubs already finding ways of paying their better players. Indeed, most of those clubs kept two different sets of books, one showing the real position regarding income and expenditure while the other was a "cleaned up" version, ready to be produced at a moment's notice should the S.F.A. demand it.

St. Bernard's though had been caught out and their officials and some of their players had been suspended, hence the prompt formation of Edinburgh Saints. None of the suspended officials or players were connected with Edinburgh Saints but the S.F.A. informed Renton that as far as they were concerned, the two clubs were one and the same and as Renton had played them, they too would be deemed as professional and all their players and officials suspended until the end of the season.

Renton were outraged by what they thought was unjust treatment and immediately instructed lawyers to fight their case, suing the S.F.A. for reinstatement, legal costs and also damages. The case rumbled on throughout the season and was not resolved until 22nd April when the S.F.A., seeing how things were going after a number of interim judgements, agreed to reinstate Renton, pay the legal costs of both sides (approximately £500) and reinstate Renton's suspended players as amateurs. Renton for their part, withdrew their claim to damages in the interests of a more harmonious future relationship with the S.F.A..

The season though was gone. Renton's Scottish League record was deleted, hence they did not appear in the final table for the 1890-91 season and they had to start afresh in 1891-92. The S.F.A. meanwhile attempted at their 1891 A.G.M., to pass a rule that no member club or anybody associated with a club could resort to the courts to correct a perceived injustice, in effect placing themselves above and outside the law. However, it was pointed out that if any club did wish to pursue such a course, then the courts would decide that no organisation could place themselves out of reach of the law and such a rule would be totally ineffective.

Renton finished 7th out of 12 in the League in 1891-92 and reached the semi-finals of the Scottish Cup, playing Queens Park at Tontine Park.

Two temporary trestle stands, one of which could accommodate between 1,500 and 2,000 people, were erected for the game which was drawn 1-1 but one of those stands collapsed. Fortunately only a few people were injured and those injuries were mostly slight although one spectator suffered a broken leg. Renton paid compensation out of the £200+ gate receipts but still made a healthy profit from the 10,000 crowd. Queens Park won the replay 3-0 at Hampden.

No doubt it was the collapse of the temporary stand that persuaded Renton to erect a second permanent grandstand at Tontine Park in November 1892. Costing £70, this new grandstand was 80 feet long but the need for it was diminishing. Renton were finding it harder and harder to retain their best players and as results declined, so did attendances.

In 1892-93, they exited the Scottish Cup in the First Round and finished 8th out of 10 in the League. Their prospects were not improved the following summer when the S.F.A. finally legalised professionalism, in effect accepting what had been going on covertly for many years. Now the wealthy Glasgow clubs could quite openly sweep up all the best talent from the Vale of Leven.

Renton finished bottom of the Scottish League table in 1893-94 and were relegated to Division Two but for a while, this seemed to revive rather than ravage the club. In 1894-95, they finished a respectable 4th in the Second Division and fought their way through to the Semi-Finals of the Scottish Cup where they were drawn away to Dundee. There was one abortive trip for Renton because the Carolina Port pitch was unfit for a cup tie and so a friendly was played which Renton won 2-1 but on 16th February, the cup tie was played and Dundee missed a late penalty allowing Renton to escape with a 1-1 draw.

It seems though that after the collapse of the temporary stand at Tontine Park, the village club had no desire to risk a recurrence and so the replay was held at Hampden where Dundee fought back from being 2-0 down at half-time to draw 3-3. But even Hampden proved inadequate to cope with the crowds who wanted to watch the game. The perimeter fence collapsed under the pressure of the supporters outside and thousands poured in through the gaps. It was estimated that 25,000 people actually watched the game but several thousand had not had to pay at the gates. The total receipts were £410 but it was stated that £100 was lost because of the fence collapse.

The venue chosen for the second replay was Celtic Park which happily was able to withstand the rigours of a Renton cup tie without major damage. Dundee though were unable to cope as well as the ground and were surprisingly easily beaten, 3-0. The attendance was estimated at over 30,000 with receipts of £839, a record for a Scottish Cup Semi-Final, and bringing the total for the four games (including the friendly) to £1,537. The final was played at Ibrox Park where Renton were denied their third Scottish Cup triumph, going down 2-1 to St. Bernard's.

Tontine Park was completely surrounded by corrugated iron sheeting at a cost of £150 before the start of the 1895-96 season when Renton finished 3rd in the League and beat both Cowdenbeath and First Division Clyde there in the Scottish Cup. In the Third Round, they drew 3-3 away to Third Lanark, also of the First Division, and then won the replay 2-0 at Tontine Park where a 7,000 crowd paid total receipts of £150, a record for the ground when no temporary stands were in use. They went out though in the Semi-Finals, 2-1 to Hibernian at Easter Road.

The 1896-97 season was unremarkable but it exposed a problem that had been bubbling below the surface for a few years. Renton was still only a small village and while many thousands would make their way there for important cup-ties, mundane Second Division games did not command the same attention for those who had become accustomed to watching the champions of the world. In fact, a good cup run was now absolutely essential in order to make good the losses made on league games. What was almost the last straw came in 1897 when the Scottish League decided that the guarantee to be paid to visiting teams should be increased from £5 to £10, something Renton would find it difficult to afford.

With the wealthy Glasgow clubs paying handsomely to attract their best players, the Villagers were struggling on all fronts and when they suffered another early exit from the Scottish Cup in October 1897, they asked the Scottish League to excuse them from their remaining commitments as they would be unable to pay the increased guarantee. Had the league refused, it is almost certain that the club would have folded completely but the committee sympathised with their plight and Hamilton Academicals were elected to take over their fixtures.

Renton completed the season with a diet of friendlies and Dumbartonshire Cup games (then played partly on a league basis but also with a knock-out element), however in March 1898, it

Below: Report from the North British Daily Mail of 21st October 1897 on the Scottish League meeting that accepted Renton's resignation.

THE FALL OF RENTON.
The Second League met in Glasgow last night to discuss the application of Renton to be freed from their Second League fixtures. Mr A. Grant, Leith Athletic, presided. Mr P. Fairley, Renton, said his club was forced to make an application to the Second League to be allowed to resign without the penalty of £20, as they were wholly unable to collect gate money to pay the necessary guarantee of £10 to the visiting clubs. It was humiliating that a club which had been the champions of the world, and had been at the inception of the First League, should require to do so. It was the League which had killed the club. He did not say the Renton would come playing, but they would accept matches as they could be got. It was unanimously agreed to free the Renton without prejudice and penalty from the League. A long discussion ensued as to how the vacancy might be filled, and as to how the points already made might be calculated. Some of the members wished the points made against Renton to be deducted, but this the clubs interested refused to do. Another suggestion was made that the League be carried on with the nine remaining clubs, and that the clubs who had points against Renton lose them. Ultimately it was decided by 5 to 3 that they recommend the First Division to agree to the election of another club from the following quartette:—East Stirlingshire, Falkirk, Albion Rovers, and Hamilton Academicals. The Aberdeen was suggested, but voted too far off. Dundee Wanderers were also mentioned for the vacancy, but the Chairman said the Wanderers owed the League money. Ayr Parkhouse was also dropped.

was feared that they may not be able to afford the £60 rent needed for Tontine Park in 1898-99. They did though manage to continue, first by changing to being all amateur and they were also helped by a newly formed junior club called Tontine Athletic who shared the ground with them. Tontine Athletic changed name to Renton Juniors in 1899.

Renton were Dumbartonshire Cup runners-up in both 1899 and 1900 but the extent to which support had fallen was shown by the fact that when receipts for their home game with Vale of Leven in this competition on 7th October 1899 were announced as being £10.11s.9d. (£10.59), the press comment, without a hint of irony, was "Things are getting better"!

Even so, football in the Vale of Leven was at a very low ebb and efforts were made in 1900 to merge Renton with Vale of Leven with the merged club taking up residence at Vale's Millburn Park ground. This would have seen the end of Tontine Park as a football venue but fortunately, the idea came to nothing. In fact, while both Renton and Vale of Leven were able to continue, it was near-neighbours Dumbarton who disappeared, the club being disbanded in August 1901.

While the loss of Dumbarton meant that the supply of players and spectators in the region was not so thinly spread, it also put a big hole in the local clubs' fixture lists and in order to fill the gap, the Dumbarton & District League was formed with 6 clubs on 29th January 1902. Remarkably, considering how late a start was made, the fixtures were completed by the end of the season.

For the 1902-03 season, Renton also joined the Scottish Combination, the most senior league outside the Scottish League itself and in the following years, they continued in senior non-League football while occasionally qualifying for the later stages of the Scottish Cup.

Qualifying Cup games sometimes attracted crowds to Tontine Park that brought back memories of the club's glory days. There were 4,000 there for a game with Clyde in October 1903 and 4,000 again for the Qualifying Cup Semi-Final with Arbroath in November 1904.

At some point, possibly in the club's dark days of the late 1890s, the two grandstands seem to have disappeared as they are unmentioned in a 1904 description of the ground published in the Dundee Evening Telegraph (*below*).



The wooden pavilion mentioned was broken into in 1905 and boots and other football items stolen but happily, the police found the culprits and recovered the items. Even greater indignity befell the pavilion on 26th July 1906, when it was burned to the ground and completely destroyed.

This time though there was nothing of value in it and as it was fully insured, it was quickly replaced.

In the 1906-07 season, Renton qualified for the Scottish Cup competition proper and were drawn at home to St. Bernard's who were to go on to be the Scottish League Second Division champions. There was a crowd of around 2,500 at Tontine Park who saw the 0-0 draw which was followed by a 1-1 draw in Edinburgh before Renton won the Second Replay, 2-0 at Celtic Park.

This put the Villagers into the Second Round and another great occasion at Tontine Park with Dundee as the visitors. Dundee were lying second in the Scottish League First Division and offered Renton a £100 guarantee plus half of all receipts above £200 to move the tie to Dens Park but the Renton committee would have none of it. The now familiar arrangements of a temporary trestle stand and a lorry for a press box were made and a crowd of 6,000 paid a total of £148 to watch the game. Renton again gave Dundee reason to rue a visit to Tontine Park, winning 1-0 but they went out at the next stage, beaten 4-1 by Queen's Park in the Quarter-Finals at Hampden.

The Dundee game though was the last of Renton's glory days. They continued in the upper reaches of Scottish non-League football up to, and even during, the First World War and in 1920-21, they reached the Second Round of the Scottish Cup, losing 3-0 away to Motherwell but the club was now just a shadow of its former self.

At a meeting in early August, 1921 it was decided to disband the club and sell the pavilion and fences to meet the club's liabilities. They were due to play Arthurlie at Tontine Park in the First Round of the Scottish Qualifying Cup on 27th August but had to scratch. Although the club itself no longer existed, the village did manage to raise a team to fulfil a Dumbartonshire Cup tie later in the season but that was the last that was heard of the ex-champions of the world.

Tontine Park was still in use by a junior team called Renton Glen Albion but they too didn't last much longer. In May 1922, their players and those of visitors Palace United began fighting on the pitch and the crowd soon joined in. The game had to be stopped and like their seniors, Renton Glen Albion did not appear for the 1922-23 season.

Tontine Park was used as a neutral venue occasionally over the next few years and from 1924-25, it was used for hockey until finally succumbing to being built on for housing in 1928.

An open recreation ground on the other side of the main road to Dumbarton then became home to whatever football was played in the village, and is still in use today. Its official name is Wylie Park but to Rentonians, that is now Tontine Park.

Below: Renton in 1927. The Dalquhurn Dye Works occupies the foreground with the River Leven snaking around it. Tontine Park is behind the left-most chimney. The pavilion survives in the top left-hand corner of the ground but it was not long before the ground was built on. The recreation ground now known officially as Wylie Park is towards the top left corner of the photograph, on the other side of the road to Dumbarton.

